

Research

We Have to Break Up

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ABSTRACT—*Three mostly positive developments in academic psychology—the cognitive revolution, the virtual requirement for multiple study reports in our top journals, and the prioritization of mediational evidence in our data—have had the unintended effect of making field research on naturally occurring behavior less suited to publication in the leading outlets of the discipline. Two regrettable consequences have ensued. The first is a reduction in the willingness of researchers, especially those young investigators confronting hiring and promotion issues, to undertake such field work. The second is a reduction in the clarity with which nonacademic audiences (e.g., citizens and legislators) can see the relevance of academic psychology to their lives and self-interest, which has contributed to a concomitant reduction in the availability of federal funds for basic behavioral science. Suggestions are offered for countering this problem.*

I am planning to retire early from my university psychology department position. The official date is still almost a year away, but it will be a premature retirement nonetheless.

IT'S NOT YOU; IT'S ME

Ironically enough, the reasons have to do with a set of mostly worthwhile developments in my home discipline of social psychology and in other arenas of academic psychology: (a) the advent of the cognitive revolution, (b) the unwritten (but nearly iron-clad) requirement for multiple study packages in our very top journals, and (c) the prioritization of mediational analysis of one's effects through the use of secondary measures. There is considerable worth associated with each of these trends. First, although far from wholly so, human conduct is broadly and distinctively cognitive. It would be folly if psychology failed to focus systematic scrutiny on cognitive variables and their roles in behavior. Second, it makes sense that our leading journals would value submissions that combine several related studies.

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In the best of such reports, editors and readers alike gain confidence in the reliability of the phenomena under study and in the validity of the researchers' theoretical conceptualizations of them. Third, who could argue with the importance of understanding what mediates the effects of interest to psychologists? Mediation is about what research psychologists care about—locating causality—and sophisticated psychometric techniques now allow mediational accounts of our major findings through the analysis of ancillary data (questionnaire responses, reaction times, personality scale scores, interview answers, etc.).

WE'VE BEEN DRIFTING APART RECENTLY

At the same time, there have been some unintended negative consequences of these shifts for me. Not long ago, one of my graduate students told me that he had checked my citation counts and found clear spikes for the articles describing the field investigations I have published. I wasn't surprised because, although I have done my share of laboratory research, I count myself principally a field researcher—I'm at my best doing experiments in naturally occurring settings with behavior as the prime dependent variable. However, that experimental orientation has not fit well with the developments I listed. First, because overt behavior rather than cognitive responding is emphasized, the outcomes often don't get the zeitgeist lift associated with advances in our understanding of cognitive processes. Also, because arranging for and carrying out data-gathering efforts in the field typically take much longer than in the laboratory, the packaging of multiple-study research reports can take numerous years; indeed, just getting the permission to conduct experiments in naturally occurring environments can take as long as completing several laboratory investigations. Finally, truly natural human activities don't lend themselves to the collection of the kinds of secondary data on which to base mediational analyses; participants in many of the contexts I have employed (e.g., automobile dealerships, hospital parking garages, amusement parks, recycling centers, hotel guestrooms) do not feel bound or inclined to offer such data in order to help some researcher distinguish among theoretical models. This is completely understandable because unlike laboratory participants, who have specifically come to be studied, field research par-

ticipants are in the settings for their own reasons that take precedence over the purposes of the researchers.

YES, THERE'VE BEEN OTHERS

The flagship journal in social psychology is the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (*JPSP*). As a past Associate Editor, I know how to get papers accepted there; along with my coworkers, I've continued to have *JPSP* articles published regularly in recent years. But, I haven't had any of my field research published there in over 15 years. And field research, remember, is what I do best. So, I have had to take reports of that work elsewhere, sometimes to top-of-the-line scholarly outlets in consumer behavior, organizational science, survey research, marketing, and management.

Although the effects of the misalignment of my strengths with the changes in my home discipline have not been especially harsh on me as regards vita-building, they have been devastating in another respect: I am no longer able to accept graduate students. At least, I am no longer able to do so in good faith because most apply hoping (a) to be trained by me in field research methods for investigating behavior in naturally occurring settings and (b) to be competitive for the best jobs in academic social psychology at the end of that training. For the foreseeable future, I know that I can reasonably help them attain only the first of those goals. Therefore, I also know that, even though academic social psychology offers a vital, burgeoning, intellectually engaging research arena, it is time for me to leave. Aside from this minor consequence, there stands to be a more far-reaching outcome of the field's retreat from the field.

OK, MAYBE YOU'VE LET YOURSELF GO A BIT

Observers of the national behavioral and social science scene as well as sympathetic elected officials have been warning for years

that unless researchers more clearly demonstrate the value of their explorations to the wider society, support will be reduced by politicians looking for ways to eliminate what their constituents do not find relevant and, hence, worthy of support. With the recent changes at the National Institute of Mental Health that have eliminated the Behavioral Sciences Research Branch, which formerly funded much basic social psychological research, those warnings have become nasty reality. As we have moved increasingly into the laboratory and away from the study of behavior, I believe we have been eroding the public's perception of the relevance of our findings to their daily activities. One of the best aspects of field research into naturally occurring behavior is that such relevance is manifest. When my colleagues and I have studied which messages most spur citizens to reduce household energy usage, the results don't have to be decoded or interpreted or extrapolated. The pertinence is plain. Truth be told, as a discipline, we've become lax in our responsibilities to the public in this regard. They deserve to know the pertinence of our research to their lives because, in any meaningful sense, they've paid for that research. They are entitled to know what we have learned about them with their money.

I ONLY WANT THE BEST FOR YOU

So, my idea for improving academic psychology would be to reassign substantially more value to field research than has been the case in recent times. It should be taught regularly in our graduate methods classes, there should be prestigious awards designated for the best of it, and it should be given more grace (and space) in the loftiest of our journals. If that could be accomplished, I would be able to head off in other directions happily knowing that my lifelong love is destined to be healthier and more appealing than ever.